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# Why should you walk along a ridge if you cannot fall down? – The risk of a total safety approach in a European perspective<sup>10</sup>

**Martin Lindner**

It has been a tragically success, when on 14 July 1865 Edward Whymper reached first the top of the Matterhorn. During the descent four of the seven first climbers died. After this extensive disaster and the loss of Lord Francis Douglas (one of the first climbers) even Queen Victoria contemplated banning all mountaineering. It seemed to be too dangerous for the young aristocrats.

Today, we know that mountaineering has not stopped. But we also know that people had serious injuries or even died during their adventures. And we can state that all accidents had an outcome to the outdoor activities field. Looking back to some fatal accidents it is surprising that the outcome to the field is different. Here are some examples.

Great Britain: Lyme Bay Tragedy (1993). In 1993 a kayaking accident occurred on the southern coast of England which is known as the “Lyme Bay Tragedy”. Four young people, who were accompanied by their teachers and two outdoor instructors, drowned in the accident. This accident received much attention and was much discussed by the public and by official authority. The accident and further debate led to the establishment of the Activity Centres Act in 1995 and the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (AALA) in 1996, two interventions that had considerable effects on outdoor practices in the field of leisure and education in England. All outdoor centres had to employ staff with technical qualifications (licenses). Pedagogy was made subordinate to technical qualifications. (see Allison & Telford 2005)

Switzerland: Canyoning accident in Saxetbach (1999). In 1999, 21 tourists died in an accident during a canyoning tour in the Bernese Highlands. In 2010, after a long debate, a federal law was passed regulating all commercially offered risk activities (canyoning, rafting, whitewater canoeing, mountain touring, snow sports) and made them all subject to an approvals system. Because of the intervention of an association of professionals in Switzerland the law was slightly changed and referred to particularly high risk potential. Therefore, the field of experiential and nature orientated learning has been hardly restricted, since their activities do not normally fall under the approval requirement. (see ERBINAT 2017)

Germany: Avalanche accidents in the Alps (1954, 1982). In 1954, ten pupils and three teachers died in a snow storm and in 1982, ten young people and three accompanying adults were

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<sup>10</sup> The presentation is based on an article written by the author together with his colleagues Martin Vollmar (see. Vollmar & Lindner 2018).



recovered dead from an avalanche. For leaders of adventure and experiential learning projects no standardised, binding requirements for carrying out outdoor practices in non-school education (e.g. Youth Welfare) have been issued by legislation, administration or court decisions.

### **Some general remarks to the perception of risk**

Risk and danger are integral components of our world<sup>11</sup> and we cannot disregard them (not now and not in earlier times; uncertainty of the future has always been around us). But it seems that there is a tendency to become more and more nervous if it comes to safety questions, especially with children and adolescents. Can we, as parents or as educators and pedagogues, leave them in an unsupervised situation? Is it necessary to take them out into situations which cannot be controlled up to 100% and, which have the potential of failure?

We should bring up children in a safe way or even better in a way that they become an autonomous and responsible person. Protection is very important but is there a tendency to over-protection? Often children are in observation: parents at home and in the garden, nurturers at kindergarten, teachers and educators at school, social worker in leisure time. In Germany, we are currently in a shift from half-day school in the morning (8a.m. to 1p.m.) towards an all-day school (till 4 or 5p.m.). This transition occurs not only because of pedagogical reasons but also because of keeping kids away from an uncontrolled time at home (parents are working) or from just hanging around. The aim is among others to create a safe and controlled environment. Additionally, we can observe that more and more parents are bringing or even driving their kids to school. It is important to know that such an attitude has contra-productive effects in terms of autonomy and responsibility. A German court (in 1993) judged in a case of a five-year old boy, who rode his bike unsupervised on a parking lot in front of the house, that obligatory supervision (the direct presence of adults) even in this age does not support independency and responsibility of children. Therefore, the court argued for the pedagogical aim of the free development of the child's personality. (see Prott 2010) With this verdict it is pointed out that there is a risk in pedagogy and education and there is also the necessity of critical situation in order to become an autonomous and responsible person. A shift from protection to overprotection does not mean to increase a safe environment.

### **Effects on outdoor pedagogy**

What does it mean for us working in the outdoors? Outdoor pedagogy, especially in its adventurous forms, is particularly confronted with the risk discourse, because dangers and risks, which often relate to natural forces and conditions, practically jump to attention.

Risk and danger both denote, at first glance, a possible damage that may occur in the future, but which exists as a possibility in the present. Therefore, risk and danger are often used synonymously, but in the context of scientific risk theories, as for example in Luhmann (1993),

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<sup>11</sup> See the German sociologist Ulrich Beck who used the term "risk society". (Beck 1992)



a difference is made regarding the attribution of damage. Risk involves possible damage or injury through conscious risk taking; risks are based on personal decision. In the case of danger, however, damage is assigned to the environment, to the non-influenceable. (see Vollmar & Lindner 2018)

Outdoor situations can be full of dangerous situation: steep descents, rapids, wet meadows in the mountains, thunderstorms, dense fog, heavy snow fall. These and many more situations affect us from the outside, from the objects. And we have to deal with them, we have to decide of whether to go out or not, to take the risk or not. It is a critical moment. As we never can be sure of the result (success or failure), the future remains open. Reinhold Messner (2013, 24), the famous mountaineer, took a clear stand: “We must not deprive nature from its opportunities. And the biggest opportunity offered to people by mountains is that we can gain experience; experience in the sense of adventure. We can learn something about ourselves.” In a more scientific approach, and following Ulrich Oevermann (2004), a German sociologist, one can speak of crises which are the essence of educational and development processes. Crises can be situations in which something unknown intrudes from the outside and requires a reaction (1), in which individuals have to make a decision (2) or in which individuals follow their curiosity to seek out new things (3). In all these situations, the risk of failure is always standing face to face with the chance of individuals proving themselves. This pattern is of great significance especially for understanding the processes of *Bildung* of humans. The structural model of adventure concentrates on the attractive resistivity, the challenges and critical character of nature. Therefore, when speaking of risks there, it can be stated that without risks there is no experience. One can say, that risks entail a dialectic relationship, a relationship of fail and the chances to prove oneself. Referring again to the quote of Reinhold Messner (2013, 24): “From the moment in which everything is made secure, the experience to be had is only of a sportive nature, no longer a holistic one.” Outdoor pedagogy lives by the openness and non-standardised character of its spaces and processes. Therefore, “no risk” amounts to erasing all impulses relevant to *Bildung* emanating from this openness and the resistances. This also comprises appropriate physical risks, without which experiential processes and growing up in the sense of individuation would run a very one-sided course.

In terms of safety questions and risk management and in terms of keeping the curiosity and the potential of experience alive, it is not the correct attitude to state “anything will go wrong” (and therefore, one has to constrain or even to avoid the risk). In contrast, one has to ask “what can go wrong and what could be the damage?”. There is a need for a qualified handling of risks. Qualified in this sense means that idealistically you have to know everything about the objects (the natural world and the challenge) but also about the individual (knowledge, capabilities, current mood...).

Going back to the situation in Germany, we have no further restriction of licences and formal qualifications. In the outdoor study programme at the University of Marburg case conferences were established, which have shown their usefulness. The focus is not on standardisation of any activity but on detailed analysis of cases from outdoor pedagogical practice in order to



generate insights for future actions. The interpretation and analysis of a written protocol does not only focus on safety issues (in terms of risk and danger) but focuses also on the whole pedagogical situation.

Taking again the three European examples from the beginning: In these examples different ways of dealing with the perception and control of risk potentials in outdoor practices have become apparent.

- Technocratic safety regulations: A technocratic development of safety requirements through state regulations greatly reduces the pedagogical potentials. One could say that the adventure is being smothered by safety standards.
- Approvals duty: The obligatory approvals system at least differentiates between encounters with nature and higher risk potentials, so that restrictions for pedagogical projects only exist if practices involve a high level of exposure for individuals.
- Case studies: Detailed case analyses allow a sensible perception of the risk potential and educational opportunities.

The three examples only show a part of the European development but the tension area between risk, technocratic risk management and pedagogical responsibility becomes obvious.

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